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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 002929

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ES](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ELECTIONS](#)

SUBJECT: ARENA'S SAN SALVADOR MAYORAL CANDIDATE LEADS

REF: A. SAN SALVADOR 843

1B. SAN SALVADOR 1823

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler, Reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: With little more than four months to go until the March 2006 municipal and Legislative Assembly elections, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party is making a serious effort at regaining the San Salvador mayoralty, held by the left for nearly a decade. A San Salvador leading daily's October poll showed an almost two-to-one inclination among respondents to vote for ARENA, rather than the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). However, name recognition of both parties' mayoral candidates is low among voters, and ARENA's weak candidate will have an uphill battle wresting control of the FMLN's metropolitan stronghold. There is a very strong possibility that the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), other minor left parties, and the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) will run a strong coalition candidate in San Salvador, which will likely split the leftist vote, thus working to ARENA's advantage. Since the undecided vote is close to 50 percent at this point, it is quite too early to determine whether the ARENA candidate will be able to maintain his present lead. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) A poll publicized October 26 by San Salvador leading daily La Prensa Grafica showed that 32.8 percent of voters favor ARENA to run the San Salvador city hall, compared with 18.0 percent for the FMLN; 33.7 percent of the 500 subjects interviewed either offered no response, or declined to reveal their preference. ARENA has not held San Salvador city hall since a leftist coalition of the FMLN, Democratic Convergence (CD), and Unity Movement (MU) carried Hector Silva to victory in 1997 over ARENA. Silva ran as the FMLN's candidate in 2000 and won reelection handily by 17 percent of the vote. In 2002, Silva decided not to pursue reelection in 2003, opting instead to head a commission on healthcare reform in the wake of the nation's bitter ISSS (public healthcare system) strike; differences in views regarding the ISSS crisis soon led to his departure from the FMLN. Elected in 2003, incumbent FMLN San Salvador Mayor Carlos Rivas Zamora ran afoul of party hardliners controlled by Schafik Handal, and has since resigned from the party (see ref. A). Handal picked orthodox ally Violeta Menjivar to be the Front's 2006 candidate, but, notwithstanding recent intensive political training in Cuba, Menjivar displays little charisma, warmth, or political savvy, and remains unknown to approximately half of prospective San Salvador voters, as does her ARENA opponent Rodrigo Samayo.

13. (SBU) A loose center-left coalition that will apparently include moderate FMLN defectors' new Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), the CDU, PDC, and others will likely run their own candidate this time around, perhaps either Hector Silva or Carlos Rivas Zamora, further weakening the FMLN's bid by diluting the leftist vote. The prospect of either ex-mayor's candidacy must give the FMLN pause, inasmuch as both enjoy high name recognition and approval ratings of approximately 60 percent, according to this same poll. It is conceivable that the FDR coalition candidate could beat the FMLN candidate for second place. An October 27 editorial cartoon shows two FMLN activists reading the newspaper and talking; one says, "The good news is that the best-rated candidates were ours". The second asks, "And the bad news?", to which the first responds, "That they WERE ours."

13. (C) COMMENT: San Salvador's vexing problems of overpopulation, poverty, and crime, together with its obsolete and crumbling infrastructure, would appear to make city hall a political trophy of questionable value. Informal street vendors make parts of the city center impassable to vehicular traffic; violent riots have resulted from efforts to move them to less problematical locations. Intransigent and well-organized municipal workers remain a perennial headache to city administrators, and are widely believed to take orders from FMLN hardliners. Against this backdrop, some believe that ARENA's selection of the lackluster Rodrigo Samayoa (see ref. B), when more dynamic candidates were available, may have signaled that ARENA is not that interested in winning the mayoralty and being forced to take on the capital's seemingly-insoluble challenges. Given the state of disarray within the FMLN, the likely entrance of a strong FDR coalition candidate, and city residents' readiness for change, May 13, 2006 may nonetheless dawn to find ARENA

with city hall, like some unwanted baby on the doorstep.
Barclay